

TESTIMONY

By
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on behalf of
THE COALITION OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RETIREES
before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS
AND PUBLIC LANDS
OF THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
regarding the
PUBLIC LAND CORPS SERVICE ACT OF 2009

April 2, 2009

Mr. Chairman and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for holding this hearing on H. R. 1612, the Public Land Corps Service Act of 2009, and for inviting the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees to testify on this Act. We are deeply appreciative of the opportunity, and of your commitment to this Act.

The Coalition now consists of more than 700 individuals, all former employees of the National Park Service, with more joining us regularly. Together we bring to this hearing over 21,000 years of accumulated experience. Many of us were senior leaders and many received awards for stewardship of our country's natural and cultural resources and making them available to people for their enjoyment. As rangers, executives, park managers, biologists, historians, interpreters, planners and specialists in

other disciplines, we devoted our professional lives to maintaining and protecting the national parks for the benefit of all Americans – those now living and those yet to be born. In our personal lives we come from a broad spectrum of political affiliations and we count among our members four former Directors or Deputy Directors of the National Park Service, twenty-three former Regional Directors or Deputy Regional Directors, twenty-eight former Associate or Assistant Directors and over one hundred and seventy former Park Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents; as well as a large number of other former employees, including seasonal employees.

I am a member of the Coalition, having served nearly 40 years with the National Park Service including in positions as park superintendent, regional director and deputy director. Since retirement I have served on the Boards of Directors of the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and Yosemite National Institutes, both serving young people in parks and other public lands. I currently am retained by SCA as an advisor.

The National Park Service, from its very beginning in 1916 has benefited greatly from service by individuals to their nation. The Service has also seen itself from that same beginning as important in the education of the American people. This Act will serve to make the traditions of the Service's past even more relevant to the needs of today and the future.

Our nation finds itself today working to address many crisis--environmental, economic and educational among them. It is also a time in our history when young people have often grown up with little opportunity for connection to either the outdoors or to our common history. Nor has personal service to the nation been at the forefront of the lives of most of them. Yet, today, you have brought before us an opportunity to combine some of the very best of American ideals into one very important Act, an Act that will benefit the national parks and other public lands. In addition, it will inspire and empower people who have inherited these same lands as either their birthright or as a result of choosing citizenship in this nation.

Some have called the national parks “The Best Idea America Ever Had.” It has been labeled so not because of the wonderful natural, scenic, historic or recreational resources which comprise the parks, but because of our nation’s democratic impulse to save these parks for all of us, regardless of who we are or where we are from. Today, the need to provide meaningful opportunity to connect Americans in the places they live to the richness of our national parks, public lands and waters and cultural heritage is ever more evident. This Act will be a permanent, beneficial bridge between Americans and their nation.

The National Park Service has valued the service of the members of the Public Land Corps since the Corps' inception. It has been a natural marriage of ideals held dear in our nation...preservation of the finest of our patrimony combined with service and opportunity for education which will further benefit both the individual and the nation for years beyond the service given.

This bill, H. R. 1612, is an excellent bill. Its enactment with a few amendments will provide important assistance to the National Park Service as it carries out its mission in the future.

The Coalition wants especially to support the following provisions in the bill, and wishes by this testimony to help ensure that they are included in the ensuing public law when it is finally enacted:

1. The amendments to Sec. 202(a) and 202(b) which recognize the equality of importance of work relating both to natural and cultural resources. Our national patrimony as included in the National Park System and other public lands is comprised of both, and both are important to our national fabric.
2. The amendments Sections 202(a)(4) and (5), which recognize and elucidate the value of national service to the participants themselves and the potential benefits to communities.

3. The amendment at Section 204(b) extending the service time to up to two years.
4. The amendments adding Section 202(b)(5) which recognizes the importance of seeking participants from diverse backgrounds and (6) which promotes public appreciation of the work of federal land, coastal and ocean management agencies.
5. The amendment of the definition in Section 203 to expand the inclusiveness of the kinds of projects that are appropriate under this Act.
6. The amendment that expands the definition of “public lands” in Section 203.
7. The amendments which add the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the Department of Commerce to the coverage of this Act, and specifically referencing “the National Marine Sanctuary System, coral reefs, and other coastal, estuarine and marine habitats”, all of which are important to the success of the mission of the National Park Service.
8. The amendments in Section 204 which relate to recruitment and training. It is highly commendable that the committee has included the requirements that training standards include, in addition to resource stewardship and health and safety, ethics, teamwork, leadership, and interpersonal communications as hallmarks for future

civic responsibility of participants in the Public Land Corps, and that participants understand the history, core values and management policies and standards of the agency for which they are providing service.

9. The amendments at Section 205(f) relating to the use of mentors from agency programs, veterans groups, military retirees and active duty personnel.
10. The amendment adding Section 206(a)(2) authorizing “consulting interns” is of great value to the National Park Service. Internships and volunteerism have long been primarily related to physical labor kinds of work, which has been appropriate and remains necessary. However, as management of national parks and other public lands and waters has matured over the years, the need for highly educated, intellectual work has increased dramatically in all fields. The specific recognition of that essential need through the authorization of “consulting interns” in this legislation is to be commended.
11. The amendment at Section 206(b)(2) authorizing implementation of the recruitment and placement requirements of carrying out the provisions of this Act through the use of qualified nonprofit organizations is crucial to effectively finding and placing highly qualified, diverse participants.

The Coalition requests the Committee to entertain possible additional amendments, as follows:

1. Section 204: The Coalition is mindful that older Americans may wish to provide service and acquire educational opportunity which they may not previously have had. Therefore, the Coalition suggests that provision be made for older Americans to serve as well as youth.
2. Section 204: The national parks, and other public lands agencies, need front line individuals who are multilingual. They also need well qualified people to assist in classroom or outdoor learning programs. The Coalition suggests that these needs be recognized in the final legislation by specific mention of them in the Interpretation or Visitor Services subsections.
3. Section 205: The Coalition suggests that the legislation should specifically authorize operation of residential centers by qualified, experienced nonprofit organizations, such as the Student Conservation Association.
4. Section 205(f): The Coalition suggests that the committee add authorization of the use of agency retirees to the mentoring program authorized in this section, noting that the Coalition of NPS Retirees could help facilitate recruitment of such mentors from its membership.
5. Experience over the last several years in obtaining approval of cooperative agreements in many agencies has been discouraging, at

best, to a wide array of nonprofit partners with long and productive relationships with agencies. The enormous time and effort spent with lawyers and contracting officers has meant large outlays of money and time by nonprofit personnel. Similarly, agencies have had to use precious funds and time themselves that could have been used for more productive purposes.. This condition has operated to the detriment of the missions of both the nonprofit partners and the agencies. This situation still exists and has the potential to create difficulties in implementation of this Act. The Coalition suggests, therefore, that Section 206 of the legislation could be greatly strengthened and the efficient implementation of the Act materially improved by adding the following language:

“The Secretary is authorized to enter into cooperative agreements noncompetitively with the Student Conservation Association or any other qualified nonprofit organization to perform any authorized function or purpose of the Department and its bureaus, if the agreement will: (1) serve a mutual interest of the parties to the agreement in carrying out the programs administered by the department; and (2) all parties contribute resources to the accomplishment of these programs.”

In addition, the Act could be strengthened, when contracting is needed, by directing the Secretary to use efficient sole source

acquisition methods when the Secretary can demonstrate that there is only one organization qualified to do the job required.

The Committee could also help insure that unnecessary and unduly burdensome acquisition procedures not be imposed in carrying out the provisions of this Act by writing report language clearly specifying the intent of the Committee (and ultimately the Congress) in these regards. It is the experience of the Coalition that contracting officers and agency attorneys often opt for the most complex approaches rather than the using those that are most efficient, while ensuring fairness to all.

The foregoing listing of exemplary benefits to the national parks and other public lands agencies is not exhaustive. This initial bill is exceptionally well written, and the Coalition is deeply appreciative of the work of the Committee and its staff in preparing it.

The benefits which will accrue to the national parks, to the other public lands, to the participants in the Corps and to the nation itself are difficult to quantify. They are, however, truly important, and will run through our entire society. As others are testifying, young people today are in a unique and not entirely favorable situation. The opportunity inherent in this bill greatly affects their future, and may well contribute to the future of their

families. In so doing, it will be the nation, our society and our environment which will benefit the most from the investments made in the young men and women who will have the opportunity of their lifetime as a result of this bill. As with the other public lands, The national parks will benefit greatly, as will the other public lands. Such benefit will not accrue only in the short term of each Corps member's service, but in the long term as well. In summary, lives will be more joyful and productive, character will be honed, America will benefit.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Committee's inspired action to support both national service and the public lands, including the national parks, through this bill, H. R. 1612. The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees is honored to have been asked to testify today, stands ready to assist your efforts in this regard in any way which we can, and looks forward to the enactment of this bill.